

Commentary

Barry Rubin's Improbable Journey

MARTIN KRAMER / FEB. 3, 2015

Today, February 3, marks one year since Barry Rubin, scholar and friend, lost his bout with an aggressive cancer. He was sixty-four. The many tributes published upon his passing celebrated him as a prolific and passionate advocate for his adopted country, Israel, and as a tireless scholar who generated a steady flow of writings and an astonishing array of initiatives: a think tank, several journals, and many conferences. His highly regarded expertise made him the go-to source on the Middle East for journalists, diplomats, and some Israeli public figures.

This was Barry Rubin, the finished product. Had you told me thirty-five years ago, when I first met him, that he would **become** not only “one of the great intellectual defenders of Israel,” but an Israeli, I would have dismissed you. Nothing would have seemed so improbable.

Barry grew up in northwest Washington to well-to-do parents who strived to assimilate. He later **recalled** having “no sense of

my own history, coming from a family which had tried to obliterate its own past.” Barry had no Zionist upbringing whatsoever—no youth movement, no summer camp, no family trip to Israel. “When I attended one-day-a-week religious school at Washington’s premiere Reform synagogue,” he later wrote, “we were told that Jewish history began with the discovery of the New World. Hebrew was taught without any reference to the existence of the state of Israel.” (Personal experience would inspire the mature Barry to write a book-length **critique** of Jewish assimilation.)

Ron Radosh has **noted** that as a young student, Barry was “hard left—as left as they come.” Perhaps it was his youthful reaction to privilege. Barry’s father was a successful Washington property developer; his parents, Barry later **wrote** laconically, “changed their Thunderbirds every year or so [in the 1960s] and at some point, a few years later, would move into Mercedes.” Radosh tells of Barry’s enthusiasm for Castro’s Cuba, which he visited in 1975. (“You’ll love Cuba!” he told Radosh. “You’ll see how Castro is building a new socialist country right in our own backyard.”) But his radicalism extended to the Middle East. He published Marxist-inflected articles in the pro-Palestinian *Journal of Palestine Studies* and the far-left *MERIP Reports*. He even **turned up** in Beirut in 1974, in the company of his Georgetown mentor, the Palestinian professor Hisham Sharabi, whom Barry candidly **described** later as “one of the teachers who most influenced me.”

“It is no secret,” he **wrote** in a 1977 letter to COMMENTARY, “that when I was young I was a leftist and anti-Zionist.”

By the time I met Barry in 1979, this was only a few years behind him. But he had already **learned** “what it’s like to believe in the totalitarian Left, to be misused and disillusioned, to go through difficult internal struggles, and finally to emerge from this dark period. Many of our finest intellectuals and journalists have had similar experiences.” The newly liberated Barry Rubin was about to forge a new persona as a serious researcher.

Walter Laqueur, the historian and author, had a major influence on Barry in the late 1970s, guiding him to a deeper understanding of the perils of the totalitarian mindset and serving as his model of a contemporary historian. Laqueur had closely dissected the vile ideological excesses of 20th-century Europe, from Nazism to Stalinism. He had written widely on the Holocaust and the Cold War, and had also authored a masterly history of Zionism. Barry’s later work showed the influence of Laqueur’s research agenda, his approachable prose, and his method of scholarly entrepreneurship. “He also taught me,” **wrote** Barry, “that being prolific is not a sin.” In a few cases they collaborated, and one of their joint projects, Barry’s revision and expansion of Laqueur’s *Israel-Arab Reader*, seems on track to stay in print forever.

According to Laqueur, he tried to dissuade Barry from specializing in the Middle East. But the unsettled region excited

Barry's own restless curiosity. Had he stayed on the left, and especially had he been willing to defame Israel, he would have been assured an academic position in the United States. Many radical Jewish academics did just that, and made comfortable careers in Middle Eastern studies. But Barry had progressed, and it left him unemployable. His only **interview** for a teaching position "was interrupted by one professor screaming at me, 'How could you ever possibly represent the narrative of the Palestinian people?' To which I responded that obviously, I didn't think I was supposed to represent it, merely teach about it.... I think the problem was my last name." Barry later wrote **this** about my own **indictment** of Middle Eastern studies, *Ivory Towers on Sand*: "When I first read it, I joked to Martin that it was my life story."

Still, when Barry moved to Israel, in the early 1990s, I was surprised. It wasn't as though Israel beckoned to him with open arms. Ironically, in Israel, too, Barry's prospects of finding an academic position were slim: he hadn't come up through the Israeli system, so he didn't have a patron. For some years, he moved around Israeli academe in adjunct or research positions, and he did a long stretch at the Begin-Sadat Center (BESA) at Bar-Ilan University. It is to the credit of the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya that it ultimately offered him a proper academic appointment.

Barry became best known not for his academic titles, but for his

many book titles. The number of these books that appeared under the imprint of first-tier university presses exceeded the production of just about any Israeli academic. Oxford University Press published four of his books: *Paved with Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran*; *Secrets of State: The State Department and the Struggle over U.S. Foreign Policy*; *Hating America*; and *Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography*. Harvard University Press published two: *Revolution Until Victory? The Politics and History of the PLO* and *The Transformation of Palestinian Politics: From Revolution to State-building*. Yale University Press published two: *Israel: An Introduction* and, most recently, *Nazis, Islamists, and the Making of the Modern Middle East*. Syracuse University Press issued *The Arab States and the Palestine Conflict*, and Cambridge University Press published *The Tragedy of the Middle East*. When Barry wrote in a more journalistic style, he placed those books with commercial presses. My personal favorite is his *Istanbul Intrigues*, a historical study set in the Second World War that reads like a thriller.

At a memorial **event** for Barry held in Washington, Judith Colp Rubin—his devoted wife and occasional co-author—said that Barry would sometimes wonder aloud whether anyone was reading his books. I'm sure he carefully monitored the sales of all his books, and it's sad to think that they disappointed him. But as a rule, books on the Middle East don't find large

audiences, unless publication neatly coincides with a crisis to which a book is immediately relevant. The closest Barry came was his 1980 **book** on Iran, *Paved with Good Intentions* (also the only book by him that I ever **reviewed**), which appeared in the midst of the Iran hostage crisis. It was widely and favorably reviewed (**most prominently** by Daniel Pipes in the *New York Times Book Review*), and it remains his most-cited work (so says Google Scholar).

But Barry was usually too prescient to get the timing right: his books often appeared *before* they became relevant. So it was with his study of Arab liberals, *The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East*, which preceded the “Arab Spring” by five years. No book came closer to predicting the explosions that eventually rocked the region. “If a large group in the Arab world,” Barry wrote, “whether a majority or sizeable minority, will someday speak and struggle for democracy, the views then expressed could confound all the public statements made in the last half-century about what people in Arab societies think.” Another book, *The Truth About Syria*, preceded the country’s breakup by three years. “With its mix of competing religious and ethnic groups,” Barry wrote in that book’s short description, “[Syria] is a 72,000-square-mile time bomb waiting to go off.” Contrary to other expert expectations, it did. Barry reached a broader audience through his journalism and blogging, and especially his long-running column in the *Jerusalem Post*. But he saw his fifteen books as

his greater legacy, and one of his last projects was to make all but the newest pair freely **available** on the web. For students and younger scholars looking for a model of meticulous analysis combined with passionate prose, Barry Rubin's virtual shelf is an excellent place to start. (It is maintained by the institute he founded, and which is soon to bear his name.)

Barry regarded his *Tragedy of the Middle East* as the book that best encapsulated his own view of the region. For Barry, the "tragedy" wasn't simply the massive dysfunction of the region's politics, but the compounding denial or deflection of blame, which made change nigh impossible. He came to his conclusions not by extensive travel (he traveled little in the Middle East, with the exception of Turkey), or by exhaustive reading (although he was very well read). Barry was informed by a vast network of Middle Easterners who knew they could share their opinions with him in total confidence. "Every single point you will read in this book," he wrote in *The Tragedy of the Middle East*,

has been made a multitude of a thousand times in private conversation by Arabs of every description and location throughout the Middle East. Yet this hidden mountain of truth is invisible in public and ineffective in shaping the life of the nation.

"What you see is only a small portion of what goes on behind the scenes," he **insisted**. Barry relied instead on his

contacts with people all over the region, sometimes people whose lives would be in danger if it were known they were talking to me.... As an Israeli, I often find it's much easier to talk with Turks, Iranians and Arabs because we are on the same page—especially in private—about understanding the reality of the region compared to the fantasies often held in Western academic, media and governmental circles.

For Barry, the regimes of the Middle East were so many Cubas, deceptively concealing oppression behind a facade of revolution, and seducing gullible Westerners with lies. Why could others not see the “hidden mountain of truth” that seemed so obvious to him? They subscribed to those same radical shibboleths he himself had abandoned. The worst offenders were the denizens of Middle Eastern studies. “I cannot think of a single book of value on any subject regarding the Middle East produced by these hundreds of tenured radicals,” Barry once **opined**. It is a harsh verdict, to be sure, but it has the ring of truth.

Over the last decade, Barry reacquainted himself with America. Much of what he saw disturbed him. During a sabbatical stretch spent in the Washington area with Judy and the children, he saw how the educational curriculum had been emptied of any pride in America's great achievements. To Barry's mind, Barack Obama personified this abandonment of

the American ethos, and in his posthumously published jeremiad against the left, *Silent Revolution: How the Left Rose to Political Power and Cultural Dominance*, he staked out his position clearly.

Yet he took heart from everyday Americans, such as the Civil War reenactors whose ranks he enthusiastically joined (on the Union side). Barry would go off almost annually to live for several days in tents with these history buffs—small contractors, office and construction workers, mechanics—and there he rediscovered the spirit of America that he so admired. They must have wondered at this eccentric man, and no more so than when Israel's then-ambassador, Michael Oren, visited Gettysburg with an entourage for the 150th anniversary of the battle, and suddenly **recognized** and embraced a grizzled Union soldier. It was Barry in authentic uniform and kit, attending his very last reenactment.

Barry's personal friendship, once given, was generous and enduring, and his love for Israel was unconditional. Born and raised in a cynical city at a troubled time, he embarked on a quest for a cause worthy of his fierce loyalty, and for people who would love him for who and what he was. After much trial and error, he found his place amidst his ancestral people, his true friends, and his adoring family. "I think it is likely that I will never leave Israel again," he wrote to me during his illness, "but then with a country we love so much that's not so bad. I am glad

to have participated with you and so many others in trying to restore and preserve our nation, the miracle that we have made and has been given to us—with all of its flaws—after so many centuries of yearning.” Barry Rubin’s own improbable journey home was one of the more amazing small miracles of which Israel is the sum.
